

Chapter 2: The Planning Process

The Draft CCP for Horicon NWR and Fox River NWR has been written with input and assistance from citizens, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and staff from state and local agencies. The participation of these stakeholders is vital and all of their ideas have been valuable in determining the future direction of the refuges. Refuge and Service planning staff are grateful to all of those who have contributed time, expertise and ideas throughout the comprehensive conservation planning process. We appreciated the enthusiasm and commitment expressed by many for the lands and living resources administered by the Horicon NWR.

Internal Agency Scoping

The CCP planning process began in January 2005 with a kickoff meeting between Refuge staff and regional planners from the Service's office in the Twin Cities. The participants in this "internal scoping" exercise reviewed vision statements and goals, existing baseline resource data, planning documents and other refuge information for Horicon NWR and Fox River NWR. In addition, the group identified a preliminary list of issues, concerns and opportunities facing the refuges that would need to be addressed in the CCP.

A list of required CCP elements such as maps, photos, and GIS data layers was also developed at this meeting and during subsequent e-mail and telephone communications. Concurrently, the group studied federal and state mandates plus applicable local ordinances, regulations, and plans for their relevance to this planning effort. Finally, the group agreed to a process and sequence for obtaining public input and a tentative schedule for completion of the CCP. A Public Involvement Plan was drafted



Prairie habitat, Horicon NWR. USFWS

and distributed to participants immediately after the meeting.

Internal scoping continued with a meeting at the Regional Office in Fort Snelling, Minnesota in March 2005. Staffers from Region 3, including supervisors, planners, and biologists covering wildlife/habitat and migratory birds joined the Horicon NWR Refuge Manager for a discussion on the issues, public response and a number of considerations related to the CCP.

Open Houses

Public input was encouraged and obtained using several methods, including open houses, written comments during a public scoping period, issue-based focus groups, and personal contacts.

Initial public scoping for the CCP for Horicon NWR and Fox River NWR began in March 2005 with a series of open house events held in Montello (Fox River), Waupun and Mayville, Wisconsin. Turnout was light with approximately 25 people in total attending.

Those interested in making written comments had until April 15, 2005 to submit them. Comments could be sent by U.S. mail, e-mail, or via the Horicon planning website on the Internet. Approximately 20 comment forms and other written comments were submitted to the Refuge during the scoping process.

Focus Group Meeting

On June 1-2 (Horicon) and June 7 (Fox River), 2005, all-day public focus group workshops were held to obtain more detailed input on the issues and opportunities identified in preliminary scoping and to begin development of alternatives. Twenty-eight people, representing Wisconsin DNR, Refuge staff, conservation organizations, neighboring communities, Refuge users, and other stakeholders attended these discussions.

Summary of Issues, Concerns and Opportunities

A large list of issues, concerns, and opportunities was generated during internal Refuge scoping, public open house sessions and workshops. The goals, objectives, and strategies in Chapter 4 are intended to address this list. The major issues addressed in the CCP are described as follows:

Horicon National Wildlife Refuge

Habitat Management

Upland habitat restoration and management

The Refuge could restore areas to historic vegetation or create habitats that are lacking in the area. Possibilities include managing the Refuge's east side as hardwoods mixed forest and the west side as grassland (historic vegetation). Or we could convert all uplands to native grassland on the entire Refuge since grasslands are lacking in area.

Invasive plant species

Habitat structure on the Refuge is threatened by invasive, non-native plant species such as reed canary grass and leafy spurge. Invasive plant species are often those introduced from Europe or Asia and they have no native biological controls in the United States. They are often early successional species adapted to disturbance, they move in quickly, and are difficult to control with traditional methods such as prescribed fire.

Land Acquisition (authorized boundary and adjustments)

Several participants suggested that the Refuge and partners actively pursue land protection within the 1995 expansion boundary. Conservation measures within the expansion area will help to protect the Horicon Marsh.

Off-Refuge involvement and external threats (i.e. watershed protection)

A large portion of the Interagency Workshop was spent discussing sedimentation and environmental contaminant issues related to the Marsh. All participants agreed that soil conservation measures in the upper watershed would go far in reducing these problems. However, increasing wetland conservation and encouraging new agricultural practices will be a huge task that will require innovative approaches to public and private partnerships.

A proposal for a wind energy facility adjacent to the Refuge, which could include up to 133 wind turbines to generate electricity, was also discussed during internal scoping. The primary concern was the potential impact to migratory birds and resident bats from striking the towers and turbines that would reach up to 389 feet above ground level.

Water Management:

The management of water levels is the key to maintaining a viable Marsh. However, the State portion of the marsh, Lake Sinnissippi, and other downstream waterbodies control how much water the Refuge can hold and release. The CCP should decide how the pools of Horicon NWR should be managed and could include filling ditches, improving dikes, and adding or removing water control structures.



Refuge road, Horicon NWR

Wildlife Management

Migratory Birds

Data suggests that predation loss is high for waterfowl and other ground-nesting birds. The small ratio of uplands to wetland area may be a factor. The CCP should decide if the Refuge should be managed for birds in migration and accept a high nesting loss or if predator control is a viable option.

Carp Control

Carp are causing a lot of damage to the wetland habitat of the Horicon Marsh. Carp control measures include trapping/removal and periodic application of the pesticide Rotenone. However, despite control measures, carp populations remain too high.

Threatened and endangered species

People enjoy seeing Bald Eagles, which are the most conspicuous and spectacular listed species that occurs at Horicon NWR. It is highly probable that Whooping Cranes, recently re-introduced to Wisconsin, will expand their use of the Refuge. Indeed, one Whooping Crane has already been using the Refuge for four years in a row, while a second crane used the Refuge in 2004 for at least a few days.

Visitor Services

Deer hunting

Horicon NWR supports a number of hunts for white-tailed deer including archery, firearm, and special opportunities for hunters with disabilities. If the deer herd is above desirable population levels, it may cause increased habitat damage, deer/auto collisions and neighboring crop damage. In addition, chronic wasting disease is a new concern within the State. Increased hunting may be a necessary control measure for all of the above reasons.

Waterfowl hunting

Horicon NWR has been entirely closed to waterfowl hunting since 1966. In 1953, the perimeter of the Refuge was opened for goose hunting, with goose blinds set up on a 7-mile narrow strip. This was originally supposed to be an experiment, but it lasted until 1966. It was basically the precursor to the intensive hunting zone that occurs today on private land around the whole Refuge. Some hunters who use the State portion of the marsh have expressed an interest in hunting on the federal Refuge. However, many hunters also value the fact that the sanctuary status of the federal Refuge also holds migrating birds in the area for longer periods of time.

Upland game hunting

Additional upland game hunting opportunities were identified including longer seasons on squirrels, rabbits, and pheasants and a possible spring Wild Turkey hunt.

Fishing

Opportunity and demand for angling on Horicon NWR is limited due to shallow water, turbidity, and higher-quality fishing opportunities in the local area. The Refuge is closed to motorboat access during the open water season. However, some ice fishing may be feasible, especially if limited to specific sites, with no permanent shanties and no motorized access.

Wildlife observation

Horicon NWR receives 450,000 visitors a year with heavy visitation in the fall during waterfowl migration. Most of these visits are concentrated on the auto tour route, walking trails, and the floating boardwalk. The CCP would be the proper place to discuss new facilities or accommodation for visitors.

State Highway 49 Issues

State Highway 49, a high-volume traffic roadway, bisects the northern edge of the Horicon Marsh. Many participants pointed out that wildlife road kill on Hwy 49 is excessive. In addition, contaminants from Hwy 49 include the potential for a toxic spill, road salts, grain spills and trash deposited along road.

Cultural Resources

As a federal conservation agency, the Service has a responsibility for the protection of the many known and undiscovered cultural resources located on Refuge lands.

Visibility of Horicon NWR as a National Resource

Horicon Marsh is recognized locally, nationally and internationally as a valuable natural resource, especially in light of its long, colorful history and designation as a wetland of international importance. However, some participants believed that more could be done to raise the stature of the Refuge, and perhaps funding levels, internally within the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Fox River National Wildlife Refuge

Wildlife Management

The Refuge was established for nesting Sandhill Cranes during a time when the species was declining throughout the Midwest. Crane numbers have increased significantly during the last 20 years. The reintroduction of Whooping Cranes to Wisconsin has created the likelihood that a nesting pair may establish on the Refuge. In fact, an individual Whooping Crane used the area in 2004.

Habitat Management

Historic habitat restoration

General Land Office surveys from 1832 suggest much of the landscape around the Refuge was historically dry prairie and oak savanna. The Refuge has been working to restore the uplands to these habitats.

Refuge inholdings and cooperative work with neighbors

The Refuge contains some small parcels of private lands within the authorized boundaries. A general desire was expressed to encourage cooperative work with landowners since we share habitats and wildlife.

Additional land conservation

Scoping participants wondered if there was a need for land protection outside existing approved boundaries. It was suggested that adjacent habitat could be restored or managed to complement Refuge goals.

Visitor Services

Deer Hunting

Currently the only public use allowed on the Refuge is deer hunting. Options discussed include more intensive antlerless harvests and total or periodic closures knowing that the chronic wasting disease concern may prevent the Refuge from decreasing the hunting pressure.

Additional hunting for small game and Wild Turkey

A few participants wanted to see more hunting opportunities on the Refuge. Law enforcement concerns and the relatively small size of uplands on the Refuge may preclude some hunts. The Refuge may be able to support a limited spring hunt for Wild Turkeys on the 250-300 acres of uplands available. Squirrel hunting on these acres is also a possibility.



Visitors to Horicon NWR. USFWS

Fishing access

Boat access for fishing is available along the Fox River. Many people have expressed interest in fishing on Long Lake. The 1-mile hike from the parking lot to the potential fishing spot is expected to limit the number of anglers. Boating access may need to be seasonally restricted to reduce disturbance of migratory birds, especially nesting Sandhill Cranes.

Potential Ice Age Trail crossing

The National Park Service has suggested that the Service establish a segment of the Wisconsin Ice Age State and National Trail through the Refuge. Trail location, maintenance, and restrictions on off-road vehicles are addressed in the CCP.

On-site environmental education and interpretation

Participants suggested that the Refuge could do more with the local community and schools. Developing a cadre of teachers and volunteers who could lead field trips was mentioned as one strategy.

Cultural Resources

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Administration and Logistics

Refuge staffing and law enforcement

The Refuge has been administered by the Horicon NWR, located a 1-hour drive east of the Fox River NWR. This arrangement will probably continue due to funding constraints and the fact that the Refuge will be relatively low-maintenance after ongoing habitat restoration.

Preparation, Publishing, Finalization and Implementation of the CCP

The Draft CCP and Environmental Assessment (EA) for Horicon NWR and Fox River NWR were prepared by a team that includes staff from the Horicon NWR and USFWS Regional Office, and with the assistance of a private contractor. The CCP/EA will be published in two phases and in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The Draft EA (Appendix A) presents a range of alternatives for future management and identifies the preferred alternative, which is also the Draft CCP. A public review period of at least 30 days, which will include a public meeting, will follow release of the draft plan.

Verbal and written comments received by the Service will be incorporated where appropriate and perhaps result in modifications to the preferred alternative or in the selection of one of the other alternatives. The alternative that is ultimately selected will become the basis of the ensuing Final CCP. This document then, becomes the basis for guiding management over the coming 15-year period. It will guide the development of more detailed step-down management plans for specific resource areas will also underpin the annual budgeting process for refuge operations and maintenance. Most importantly, it lays out the general approach to managing habitat, wildlife, and people at the Horicon NWR and Fox River NWR that will direct day-to-day decision-making and actions.